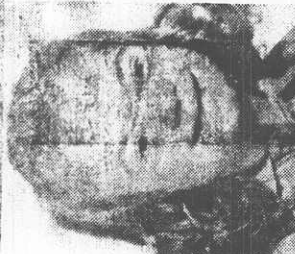


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S.I. girl's mom: 'I'm still hoping'



Jennifer Schweiger

By HEIDI EVANS
Daily News Staff Writer

Clutching her red cigaret case, a tattered copy of St. Jude's prayer taped onto it, the anguished mother of missing 12-year-old Jennifer Schweiger kept vigil yesterday, as police and dozens of volunteers combed Staten Island's abandoned Willowbrook mental institution.

"It's frustrating," said Karen Schweiger, who had been sitting outside one of the facility's boarded-up buildings since 9 a.m. as search dogs sniffed inside for clues. "I'm still hoping that the man who took her is a person who was just lonely and is taking care of her."

Jennifer, who has Down's syndrome, disappeared July 9 from outside her Westerleigh home, not far from the 382-acre Willowbrook grounds. She was last seen walking hand in hand with a man described as homeless, in his late 50s or early 60s, balding and missing some front teeth.

"They could be right underneath us," said Schweiger, 39, referring to the extensive network of steam tunnels beneath the 50 abandoned brick buildings.

Strangers join search

Yesterday's search was the latest in a huge effort by authorities and civilian volunteers to find the young girl, who was described by relatives as friendly and trusting. Even strangers who heard about Jennifer's plight from news reports mobilized yesterday to help find her.

"I've had teenagers, grandmothers, people who are afraid to go into their basements but who will go into the woods without hesitation to search for Jennifer," said Donna Cutugno, the volunteer coordinator.

"Instead of going to the beach, I'm going to do a good deed," said Adrienne Lara, 20, who drove from New Jersey with her cousin to join the hunt after seeing a story about Jennifer on TV. "I have a little sister named Jennifer. I wouldn't want this to happen to her."

Marlene Provenzano, 37, of Westerleigh, came prepared with gloves and insect repellent.

"I've been thinking about this for a week," she said. "I feel like it's closer to home. Plus she's a Down's kid. She's helpless."

Karen Schweiger called the community outpouring "absolutely wonderful."

Schweiger, whose husband, Kenneth, spent the day frantically crawling through tunnels for his daughter, imagined Jennifer would be very frightened by now.

"She would know she's far from home and if she thought this was an expedition at the start, I'm sure she doesn't think so anymore," said the mother.

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'IT'S FRUSTRATING . . . They could be right underneath us," said Karen Schweiger (left), mother of missing 12-year-old. Volunteer coordinator, Donna Cutugno (right), says even strangers are helping.

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